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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: MOI Temporarily Bans Independent Daily Over
Inscrutable Cartoon

Ref: Rabat 608

11. (U) This cable is sensitive but unclassified.
Please protect accordingly.

Summary and Comment

12. (SBU) On September 28, Morocco's Ministry of Interior (MoI) banned an independent daily from publication, seizing copies of the newspaper in circulation, and shuttering its offices. The move followed publication of a cartoon showing recently-wed Prince Moulay Ismail at his wedding ceremony seated in front of a Moroccan flag with a star resembling the Star of David. The newspaper was allowed to resume publishing two days later, but faces additional civil legal action and a defamation lawsuit by the prince. The MOI action unleashed a spirited debate on-line and in the written press, with some taking the government's side, often claiming that the cartoon was anti-Semitic, and others viewing this as one of a recent series of media-muzzling events (reftel). This incident is part of a worrisome trend of growing official antipathy towards the independent press which, if intended to promote self-censorship, appears consistently to be backfiring. End summary and comment.

Morocco's Very Own Cartoon Controversy

13. (U) The cartoon, published on September 26 by independent Arabic-language daily "Akhbar Al Youm," depicts Prince Moulay Ismail (a first cousin of King Mohammed VI) seated during his wedding ceremony. Behind him all is painted red, the background of the Moroccan flag. On the red background, partially obscured behind the prince, is a green star, as on the Moroccan flag. Although obscured, the flag is unmistakably a six-pointed Star of David, rather than the five-pointed star of the Moroccan flag. The caption simply identifies the subject and the location.

14. (U) Debate about the meaning of the cartoon has raged in Morocco, especially in the blogosphere, but most observers judge it to be inscrutable. Prince Moulay is not known to be particularly in favor of normalization with Israel. There have not been any known controversies connecting him to Israel. Some local bloggers have suggested that the cartoon is an

oblique reference to the bride's German origins (she comes from a German diplomatic family that converted to Islam before her birth), and is commenting on the complicated Germany-Israel-Arab relationship. Some even see the prince's arm position as raised in a Nazi salute.

Authorities React

¶5. (U) The Saturday/Sunday issue containing the cartoon was not pulled from kiosks until Monday, the same day the MOI sent officers to close "Akhbar Al Youm"'s main office in Casablanca, and detain the paper's director, Taoufiq Bouachrine, and cartoonist Khaled Kadar, for questioning. Bouachrine claims he was threatened by the secret police. "Akhbar Al Youm" was not allowed to publish again until September 30. In explaining its actions, the MOI in a statement called the cartoon "a blatant disrespect to a member of the royal family. In addition to tendentiously using the national flag, the cartoon undermines a symbol of the Nation by insulting the emblem of the Kingdom? the use of the Star of David in the cartoon raises many questions on the insinuations of the people behind it and suggests flagrant anti-Semitic penchants."

¶6. (U) Minister of Communications Khalid Naciri, the government spokesperson who was also front-and-center during the August controversy about polling the popularity of the King, gave a press conference

on October 1 defending the government's actions. "It is the duty of the government to implement the law to put an end to actions that breach the laws in force." Naciri again referenced Morocco's superior press freedom compared to other Arab and African countries, but pointed out that journalists had to operate within a "professional framework" that engendered "responsible media" instead of just "slander."

No Offense Intended

¶7. (SBU) Bouachrine told PAS that "it was a strange decision by the MoI and a big surprise; the decision is illegal." He added that only the Prime Minister's office had the legal authority to suspend publication of a newspaper. Bouachrine insisted that the cartoonist meant to draw a five-pointed star, but made a mistake. (Comment: Anyone seeing the cartoon in question finds this entirely implausible. End comment.) Bouachrine has blanketed the local press with interviews, pressing his case that the MoI acted inappropriately and illegally, and that the newspaper had meant no offense, intending simply to mark the prince's wedding with a cartoon depicting him in celebration.

Mixed Reactions in Moroccan Press

¶8. (U) Most partisan newspapers supported the government's position, and were harshly critical of "Akhbar Al Youm." "L'Opinion," an organ of nationalist Istiqlal party, called "Akhbar Al Youm" "dangerous and irresponsible." Istiqlal's Arabic daily, "Al Alam," said that "Akhbar Al Youm" had humiliated the national flag. A newspaper affiliated with socialist USFP also backed the government. Several commentaries in the partisan press cited the perceived anti-Semitism of the cartoon in support of their position.

¶9. (U) For their part, independent news outlets have largely sided with "Akhbar Al Youm," seeing its travails as emblematic of a series of actions stretching back through 2009 that trace an increasingly worrying trend of press freedom impingement. "Nichane," recently caught in its own confrontation with the government (see reftel), was most scathing: "Violations against press freedoms have continued with a rocketing pace, an unprecedented pace? we have never seen anything like this in Morocco? in the event that the situation continues to deteriorate at such a rapid pace, we are heading with firm steps towards 'dictatorship.'"

¶10. (U) The main journalists' union (SNPM) and the Committee to Protect Journalists came out strongly in favor of the paper. SNPM called the GOM actions "an illegal step and a flagrant violation of the law." CPJ's New York office issued a statement condemning the government's move and pointed out that Moroccan Press Law only allows the ministry to ban a single issue of a periodical deemed disrespectful to the royal family. The two organizations representing Moroccan publishers have not weighed in formally, although the head of the main publishers' association (FMEJ) wrote an editorial supporting "Akhbar Al Youm" in the newspaper he runs, "Aujourd'hui le Maroc."

¶11. (U) Interestingly, an on-line poll being conducted by the popular Moroccan news portal Hespress.com finds Moroccan public opinion roughly evenly split. Hespress.com asked its readers to respond to the question: "Do you support suing Akhbar Al Youm?" As of October 5, the results were 50% against, and 45% in favor.

¶12. (U) Government accusations of anti-Semitism were echoed by the Council of Morocco's Jewish Communities (CCIM), which formally expressed its outrage at the cartoon and highlighted the norms of tolerance in Morocco. Independent daily "Al Jarida Al Oula" disagreed, expressing in a front-page

editorial "deep surprise" at the accusations and in turn accusing the Jewish community of focusing on the cartoon instead of recent violent events in Jerusalem and the Al Aqsa mosque dispute.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) While this incident will most likely pass with little or no legal action taken against "Akhbar Al Youm," it serves to reinforce what is an increasingly worrisome trend of growing official antipathy towards the independent press. Each of these incidents also further reinforces the futility of GOM efforts to modulate freedom of expression. This poorly drawn and frankly uninteresting cartoon, initially seen by perhaps a few thousand readers, would have quickly been forgotten. But as a result of the GOM reaction, many times the initial number saw the cartoon, launching a vigorous debate on-line and in the written press about both the meaning of the cartoon, and the legitimacy of GOM actions against "Akhbar Al Youm."

¶13. (SBU) Moroccan authorities appear not to understand their predicament: the Moroccan press and blogosphere are free enough to debate endlessly -- and in embarrassing (for the government) detail -- each official effort to rein in press freedom. This in turn exposes the GOM to international opprobrium, while simultaneously expanding greatly the number of Moroccans who learn about the lapse (perceived or

otherwise) in journalistic ethics the authorities sought to suppress. Meanwhile, the increasing number of these incidents suggests that GOM measures are decreasingly effective even in promoting self-censorship. As a result, Moroccan authorities end up with the worst of all worlds: widely (and internationally) publicized criticism for their occasional heavy-handed efforts that harms their international reputation, but without the means to genuinely keep a lid on press coverage or commentary not to their liking. End comment.

Kaplan